

Sounds of a Speech



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It's about to be a good day. Relatively speaking. One often wonders, would my best day still cause the average person to off themselves, would what is a good day to me get others to seek professional help? But the temperature is tolerable, even though the hot period of the year, shifted back into August, isn't over, something approaching enough sleep has been consumed, there's nothing too pressing, and so One can go to that café and sit outside on the patio on one of the uncomfortable chairs, have a coffee and read. And so One sets out, strolling down four corners and into the café, and on to the patio, nodding a Hello to the waitress and lifts his hands to the sign for 'safe my life with a cardiac in a large cup'.

It may not be too hot, but not cool enough to spend time sitting in the sun. They put up a bunch of parasols, but angle is important. Only one of the small tables in full shade is vacant, and One is

steering in its direction. At the neighbour table two young women, and before One even sits down it emerges that reading will be challenging. They're both clearly used to using their voices above others. One often suspects that the training consists of an overload of parties and club visits – it takes a special kind of person to pick a situation in which to communicate with others on top of one's lungs for a pastime. Correction. That kind of person appears to be far too commonly represented to call them special.

One of the pair is in main charge of the conversation, the other one's role is to wedge in an interested response here and then, otherwise the situation would soon begin to look odd, because her friend is a pore-breather. Ironically, and it's only the first ironic twist, ironically the moment's topic happens to be 'reading books'. The topics will change rather rapidly. But 'reading books'. Being caught reading a book can nowadays lead to curious, inquisitive looks. To an air of appreciation across the aisle, or whatever public space this may still happen in. Phones are out ubiquitously, any survey conducted on the subject, say in the tube, would probably see an imbalance of 30% of people unsure about what to do with their hands, not to mention their minds. But reading a book?

'A book,' PB says with a passion that sounds quaint because it's said in a manner One would expect her to marvel at an outfit worn by Nicki Minaj with. She continues to emote over how much she enjoys sitting down with an actual, physical copy of a book, and how she sometimes just has to read a book, and just to hold a book in her hands, the feel of it...

One sits down and gets out the actual, physical copy of the book One's reading and puts it on the table. There's no intent in this action other than having both hands free to roll a smoke. The coffee arrives, and One opens the book to the next story and prepares to concentrate hard, knowing it'll be an uphill battle. The conversation next table has moved on to some guy, his hair had been darker before, but has now been bleached by all the sun and salt water while surfing, and now it's '*blond*, really, it's been totally bleached.' PB, not much used to spending too much time on the subject of him or her or them or even us, pauses for nearly a quarter second, then muses whether it'll be the same for her if she really decided to move to Spain, will she also become bleached blond. Her hair is a raven black, though possibly with the help of some dye, and she's well tanned, almost done. [] One can't really be angry with her, not even much annoyed, she and her friend had been here first, and there were other tables vacant, albeit be it in full sunshine. Focusing on the story he's reading is a task, however, and success is varying, which is a shame, because the story is real good. There's a short reprieve when PB's conduit friend has to go to the bathroom. Perhaps it's only One's impression, but the bathroom visit turns out as the briefest ever in the history of female Nature Call responses.

A wasp is interested in first One's table and coffee, then One. There's always one wasp, only one, in this café, and One suspects it's always the same wasp, an egoistic wasp having scouted out this source of sweet nutrients, and failing to inform its comrades. It inspects this giant creature sitting at the promising round thing by means of its customary left- and right-swinging airborne motions. After a moment One carefully waves a hand, and the wasp intensifies the motion, and then fucks off. It's an interesting response, wasps will fly off if a giant hand is waved at them not too hectically, but they only do it after some good threatening. Even in retreat a message is given, and it's being understood. The clearest form of communication across species.

Soon after another vacancy opens, another table in shade and a little further from the mostly singular sound of PB's speech. One calmly picks up his cup, book, smokes, lighter and bag, and migrates. If there's a reaction on behalf of the pair, One's missing it, the flow of words continues uninterrupted. It's still audible from where One is now sitting, audible and continuous. Other people are speaking, but they're rendered inaudible. One orders another coffee, ordinary size, and a slice of gâteau with cream.

It's better here. And the story is good. Very good. And it happens to be titled 'Speech Sounds'. Octavia Butler. In it an undefined disease has caused humanity to become mentally impaired in various ways and to various degrees, with the most common denominator being the loss of capacity for speech. Not losing hearing, and not losing the ability to vocalize, but the mental proficiency to

use words, to make sense of the words one wants to speak, and to read or write them. All they have left is gestures, and growling and grunting, and shouting vowels.

Not really listening to the contents of PB's words, not having to over this slightly greater distance, and the perpetual flow indeed seems to become one, endless word. One pauses reading for an instance, recalling a little story Glenn Gould had once told an interviewer about him practising a Mozart piece when he was a teenager. Suddenly a vacuum cleaner was thrown on in the room. He maintained that at the time he and the housekeeper had been engaged in a feud and that it was done on purpose. In any case, he couldn't quite hear himself playing, but then a most marvellous thing occurred. The sound of the piano being drowned in the loud hum of the vacuum cleaner, he experienced the piece in a solely tactile way, and it opened up the work for him in a manner listening to the piece could never had. Mozart and Gould had a strained relationship.

Something now changes here, too. Yes, the flow of speech, the long word, it has ended. Not really, though, it has just been interrupted for a few seconds. PB is on her feet, her upper arms raised to her sides, her lower angled with both her hands forming the letter O on her shoulders like a deranged ballerina, and she's staring at the table. The wasp. One is trying to avoid dark thoughts.

She sits down only after the wasp has moved on to sweeter pastures, and after remarking how much she hates wasps the single word flow continues.

Wasps have earned their bad rap because everything about them is centred around a general statement of warning. The aforementioned behaviour when encountering the mildest form of what could be interpreted as a threat, the humming of their flight. But what other animals, humans among them, react to mostly, before the humming, before the bully-conduct, before even the knowledge, the memory of how painful their stings are, what comes first in this preemptive chain of telling others to beat it or else, is colour. The combination yellow-black is the most universal among the choices that are to express Danger, exceeding the popularity of red and black, and is indeed so successful that it's been picked up, with the help of a little time, by perfectly harmless beings. It is deeply buried in the psyche of visually able lifeforms, and it works to this day, and it works very well in humans, too.

In Butler's story the budding human civilization has crumbled, fallen apart, and the encounter between a now illiterate former writer and a wordless man fighting insanity by patrolling the area as a self-made cop unfolds in a surprisingly sensual and yet unsentimental way. And suddenly all goes quiet. Perfectly quiet. Totally quiet.

Well. Not really. Quiet enough for One to hear several sighs of relief, sighs that have some of the sighers find each others' eyes and smiles, understanding, sympathizing. Ah! At last.

It's not perfectly quiet. There's the muffled street noise coming from beyond the houses. A few birds chirping. The breeze softly rustling the foliage. Children playing somewhere. No insects, though, other than One's old friend, the wasp. That, too, has to do with the heat. But it's the usual background noise a city emits, far from being quiet in any sense. It's just the contrast.

One finishes the story, its afterword, and then another, very short one. It's been a while since last he'd felt so close to a writer. Not alone her stories, but the writer herself. Butler had prefaced this volume herself, beginning with letting the readers know that she actually hated writing short stories, only to open the book with one of the greatest science fiction short stories One had ever read.

One also finishes the coffee and gateau. The wasp had visited twice more, and One had wondered whether he should be concerned about it dissing the cake. In the end the book, the story had won. The task hadn't been so hard, because he'd been kept calm about it. The noise had, after all, been that of a vacuum cleaner. Content-free, nothing but one, continuous hum, through which the story about a loss of words had sounded in a tactile way, touching him like few others had.

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